



TOP LEFT: Clayton Sinyai, Executive Director of the Catholic Labor Network; BOTTOM LEFT: Fr. Ty Hullinger, pastor of St. Anthony of Padua, St. Dominic, and Most Precious Blood Churches in Baltimore, Md., and Craig Carter, UNITE HERE Local 7; ABOVE: Fr. Eugene Pocernich of Milwaukee joins airline food service workers for an informational picket at Chicago's O'Hare Airport

## Catholic Labor Network: Defending Workers During and Beyond the Pandemic

BY BETH GRIFFIN

When the pandemic gripped the United States in 2020, 90% of workers in the hotel industry were laid off as the travel business was effectively shut down.

Many of the unemployed were low-income workers and immigrants. Most lost employer-supported health care. Few had any guarantee of a post-shutdown job.

The Catholic Labor Network (CLN) rushed to help. CLN brings together Catholic laity, religious, and clergy who find inspiration in Catholic social teaching on labor and who share it with the world. The group promotes social justice and the cause of workers in labor unions, parishes, workplaces, and other organizations. It is the recipient of a five-year Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) Strategic National Grant to strengthen the relationship between Church and labor through concrete activities.

Like so many organizations accustomed to in-person organizing, CLN was challenged to pivot to electronic platforms during the pandemic. "Once we and our members and contacts learned to use Zoom, we could bring together large groups without concern for geography," says Clayton Sinyai, CLN executive director. "We multiplied the number of people we could engage, from 1,000 to 5,000."

CLN hosted an online prayer service for COVID-impacted workers and two major liturgies oriented to worker justice. One Mass marked Workers' Memorial Day on April 28, 2020, which Clayton says is an opportunity for labor activists in the United States and Canada to remember the 4,000 to 5,000 workers who die on the job each

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Through the CATHOLIC CAMPAIGN FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD

across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the CCHD has contributed over \$400 million to nearly 12,000 low-income led, community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR



Dear Friends:

Like many people, I was fortunate to be able to work from home last spring during the pandemic shutdown. I may have groused a bit about back-to-back Zoom meetings, but I was grateful to be safe and relatively removed from situations where the coronavirus was likely to be transmitted. Of course, this was not the experience of essential workers and those whose jobs evaporated overnight when we went into lockdown. As one of our grantees said, "There were two groups of workers impacted by the pandemic: the ones who worked throughout and the ones who didn't have work."

Essential workers risked exposure to the virus every day, and some were also cheated out of just wages by their employers. Millions of low-income workers in the hospitality and travel sectors lost their jobs and whatever health benefits were associated with them. I have heard estimates that as many as 95% of workers in the hotel, restaurant, and airport industries were laid off or furloughed through no fault of their own.

As we have described in recent issues of *Helping People Help Themselves*, many organizations funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) pivoted during the pandemic to meet the changing needs of their members and others they serve. After an initial period of reflection (and perhaps confusion), they devised new ways to organize, share resources, and support one another.

One such group is the Catholic Labor Network (CLN), which we have profiled before in these pages. Its daily actions embody Catholic social teaching as it brings together Catholic laity, clergy, and religious with labor unions to support the rights and dignity of workers. During the pandemic, CLN organized workshops for priests and lay social ministers to reflect on the theme of Ministry to Workers in the Time of COVID. I attended one of the workshops via Zoom and was moved beyond words by the firsthand accounts of hotel workers who lost their jobs in the blink of an eye. They described fear for their families, uncertainty about the future, and the seemingly fruitless wait for a phone call summoning them back to work. There is a huge difference between hearing personal

accounts from people you can see and reading dry statistics or news accounts of staggering unemployment.

The experience would have been numbing if I had not been confident that CCHD and CLN were taking concrete action to help the speakers and their fellow workers. CLN organized support for Right to Recall legislation that helped workers regain jobs and seniority as pandemic restrictions were eased. It also identified and effectively addressed wage theft among essential workers in the construction industry.

We are able to do this important, life-affirming work with low-income and marginalized communities because we have your prayerful and financial support. Thank you for your ongoing generosity.

**RALPH McCLOUD**, Director  
*Catholic Campaign for Human Development*



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year. The second Mass, on Labor Day 2020, drew more than 1,000 people to the virtual event. Bishop John Stowe of Lexington presided, and AFL-CIO president Rich Trumka served as lector.

CLN also organized a series of Workers Speak Out panels that let the unemployed hotel workers address labor representatives and Catholic audiences about the challenges they faced because of COVID-19. Another workshop series on Ministry to Workers in the Time of COVID invited priests and lay social ministers to hear from representative workers and then engage in guided reflection and discussion.

“There were two groups of workers impacted by the pandemic: the ones who worked throughout and the ones who didn’t have work,” Clayton says. “Tens of millions in the hotel and restaurant industry lost their jobs. Other essential workers risked exposure to the virus.”

“Participants in the panels and workshops were deeply moved by the testimony of the workers who’ve been through the pandemic,” Clayton says. The practical outcome was a groundswell of support for local and state legislation to guarantee workers reemployment and seniority when their worksites reopened. “‘Right to Recall’ bills guarantee that hotels and restaurants would call back the employees who helped them build the business in the first place,

rather than hire them to start all over from the bottom,” Clayton explains.

He says the effort was particularly successful in Baltimore, where supportive letters from parishes helped convince the city council and mayor to pass Right of Recall legislation. CLN also worked with the Jesuits West Province to get a similar statewide law enacted in California. Clayton says parallel efforts are now underway in Chicago, Tacoma, WA, and Minnesota.

Fr. Ty Hullinger is pastor of three parishes in the Archdiocese of Baltimore that are part of a seven-parish cluster. He and members of his parishes participated in the Workers Speak Out panels. “Our lay leaders are very active in worker justice efforts and were supportive of members of a local union of hospitality workers, Unite Here,” he says.

“The workers deserved respect for their work. We wanted to see them protected and not lose their jobs through no fault of their own. When conditions changed, we wanted them to have the right to go back to work,” Fr. Ty says.

“Hearing the workers’ stories in the online meetings, it was easy for the parishioners to make a commitment to sign letters of support for the Right to Recall legislation,” he says.

Parishioners have also promoted a not-yet-successful effort to win the same

rights for retail and concession workers at the state-run Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport. Fr. Ty says, “We’re practicing the Catholic social teaching of being in solidarity with the workers.”

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Fr. Ty’s parishioners include refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, and Nigeria. Although they are not primarily employed in the hospitality sector, they are in a situation that Fr. Ty says “is precarious at best. There’s no union. They work for subcontractors and there is a lot of transition.”

“We hope our efforts will lift up other industries and help them get Right of Return coverage,” he says.

Fr. Ty says, “The Catholic Labor Network challenges all those in the Church to listen to workers, hear their struggles, and apply

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Fr. Sinclair Oubre, JCL, diocesan director, Stella Maris (Apostleship of the Sea), Diocese of Beaumont, and executive director for the Port Arthur International Seafarers’ Center, drives Indian, Filipino, and Croatian seafarers from the *Maersk Penguin* at Energy Transfer to the Seafarers’ Center for vaccinations on May 29.



The first group of seafarers from the *Maersk Penguin* are all smiles as they pose with Fr. Sinclair Oubre and prepare to depart the Seafarers’ Center to return to their ship, having been vaccinated after waiting several months.



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Nurses Nataly Perez, Crystal Torres, and Sunita Dixon chat with an Indian seafarer onboard the *Alpine Maya* at Valero Refinery in Port Arthur, TX as they vaccinate him.

Catholic social teaching. It encourages us to accompany and support workers, so they know they are not alone.”

During the pandemic, CLN also addressed wage theft issues in Washington, DC, and Maryland. Construction workers were deemed essential employees and were not subject to shutdown rules. When CLN heard repeated stories about pervasive underpayments, it dispatched its full-time wage theft field representative on a yearlong project to conduct extensive interviews with workers at the largest construction sites throughout the DC area.

“We found that nearly half the 80 workers interviewed were part of an underground economy: they were misclassified as independent contractors or they were working off the books,” Clayton says. “These workers had been denied overtime pay when working more than 40 hours a week, and several were being paid less than the DC minimum wage.”

“Employers were not paying into Social Security or Medicare, so the workers were cut out of those benefits. Not surprisingly, most were recent immigrants,” he says.

CLN helped four immigrant construction workers to file a class-action lawsuit against the largest construction firm.

The suit is ongoing. District of Columbia law allows a civil suit to be filed against general contractors if their subcontractors are engaged in wage theft.

A report about CLN’s findings was released just before April 15, 2021—traditionally Tax Day—and was sent to members of the DC city council. Clayton says, “Large employers look the other way when their subcontractors use labor brokers to hire people off the books. We are in meetings with city council members to explore solutions, but the problem won’t be fixed until contractors police their own jobs and make sure that people are paid appropriately. The suit is an incentive to do that.”

CLN grew out of efforts in Decatur, IL, being made by two dozen priests, deacons, religious, and laity in 1996. Two strikes and a lockout at three facilities had created unrest in the community. A group of labor-active Catholics met to talk, pray, and reconnect with the labor movement. Participants returned home with a mission to reestablish ties between Church and labor and to promote social justice issues, including collective bargaining, fair wages, and working conditions. Clayton was the volunteer leader of CLN until the organization’s board tapped him to become the first executive director in 2019.

In 2020, CLN was recognized as an Association of the Faithful in the Archdiocese of Washington. Canon law permits groups of baptized persons to form Associations of the Faithful to jointly foster a more perfect life, promote public worship or Christian teaching, or devote themselves to other works of the apostolate.

Clayton says, “We started out as a religious organization,” and CLN sought the canonical recognition “to demonstrate that we are in union with the Church, we are under review of the local ordinary, and what we are doing is standard, orthodox Catholic social teaching. This helps us communicate that message.”

He says that Fr. Sinclair Oubre—a merchant sailor in the Diocese of Beaumont, TX, who is CLN’s spiritual moderator and a canon lawyer—developed the statutes for the group to become an Association of the Faithful.

CCHD established the Strategic National Grant program as a response to timely opportunities relevant to the priorities of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). The program focuses on strategies to fight the root causes of poverty and reflects the CCHD foundations of Catholic teaching, participation, and nonpartisanship.

“The Catholic Labor Network is sharing the good work of Catholic social teaching with priests, lay ministers, and diocesan offices around the country,” Clayton says. “We couldn’t have accomplished any of the progress we’ve made without CCHD. In 22 years as an all-volunteer group working nights and weekends, we built a network of 500 members and contacts. Now we have 5,000.”

“In the future, I see the work falling more heavily on the shoulders of laypeople than priests, but we are taking our message to seminaries to reach the next generation of priests. We are also reaching out to national-level partners in Catholic social ministry and Catholic Charities. A nationwide effort to rebuild successful relationships between Church and labor could be transformative, as it was in the mid-twentieth century,” Clayton concludes. ☛